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Estelle R. Ramey, 89; Used Medical Training to Rebut Sexism

By MARGALIT FOX

Estelle R. Ramey, an endocrinologist, physiologist and feminist who came to national prominence in 1970 after she famously rebutted a Democratic leader who pronounced women unfit for important jobs because of the "raging hormonal influences" to which they were supposedly subject, died Friday at her home in Bethesda, Md. She was 89.

The cause was complications of Alzheimer's disease, said her daughter, Drucilla Stender Ramey.

Professor Ramey was most recently emeritus professor of physiology and biophysics at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, where she had taught for many years.

The controversy arose in April 1970, at a session of the Democratic Party's Committee on National Priorities. Representative Patsy T. Mink of Hawaii had just urged the committee to make women's rights a major issue. She was challenged by a committee member, Edgar F. Berman, a retired surgeon and a confidant of Hubert H. Humphrey, the former vice president.

"If you had an investment in a bank," Dr. Berman said, "you wouldn't want the president of your bank making a loan under these raging hormonal influences at that particular period."

He continued: "Suppose we had a president in the White House, a menopausal woman president who had to make the decision of the Bay of Pigs?" (He meant the Cuban missile crisis.)

Reading Dr. Berman's remarks, Professor Ramey was moved to action. She studied hormones for a living. She also had, as she would later say in interviews, "a very sharp tongue."

In a letter published in The Washington Star, she wrote, "As an endocrinologist in good standing, I was startled to learn that ovarian hormones are toxic to brain cells."

She went on to remind the public that during the Cuban missile crisis, the nation had a president who suffered from a severe hormonal imbalance: John F. Kennedy, who had Addison's disease, an endocrine disorder.

Her comments were widely reproduced, and Professor Ramey was soon in great demand in the news media and on the lecture circuit. Amid the furor over his remarks, Dr. Berman was forced to resign from the committee.

Estelle Rosemary Rubin was born in Detroit on Aug. 23, 1917, the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Europe. The family moved to Brooklyn when she was a baby and, after her father died when she was an adolescent, their existence was threadbare.

After graduating from high school at 15, she earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics and biology from Brooklyn College in 1937; a master's in physical chemistry from Columbia in 1940 and a doctorate in physiology from the University of Chicago in 1950.

Before joining the Georgetown faculty in 1956, Professor Ramey taught at Queens College, the University of Tennessee and the University of Chicago. A founder and former president of the Association for Women in Science, she also was a past member of the President's Advisory Committee for Women.

Besides her daughter, of Manhattan, she is survived by her husband, James T. Ramey, whom she married in 1941; a son, James N., of Bethesda; a brother, Jack Rubin, formerly of Little Neck, N.Y.; and five grandchildren. Information on other survivors could not immediately be confirmed.

Throughout her research, which focused on the relationship between hormones and stress, Professor Ramey was struck again and again by the fact that men seem to be at a natural hormonal disadvantage: they are more inclined toward aggression, die sooner and are more prone to heart attacks and strokes.

As she often said in the popular press, "Maleness is a biological risk factor."

Dr. Berman, who helped propel Professor Ramey into the national spotlight, died in 1987, at 68, of a heart attack.